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ABSTRACT

The eradication of illiteracy in Russia has a lengthy history but a systematic literacy campaign began only after the revolution of 1917. The literacy problem was considered to be solved two decades later. Success was due to the following factors: (1) illiterate people were eager to learn; (2) the eradication of illiteracy and preparation for general education were carried on simultaneously; (3) radical social and economic changes were taking place, the campaign had a nationwide character; and (4) teachers were trained to teach reading and writing to all nationalities. In the early 18th century, Peter the Great introduced the Cyrillic alphabet and opened the first public schools. In the second half of the 19th century, the peasants' school system expanded and distance education appeared. However, the demand for education could not be satisfied because the tsarist government deliberately restrained cultural development. In the beginning of the 20th century, only about 22 percent of Russians were literate. In 1918-20, schools increased by 13,000 and 2 million more students enrolled. It was extremely urgent to eradicate technical illiteracy. Four-year factory and workshop schools were started in 1921. By 1939, the USSR literacy rate had reached 81.2 percent. Since then, literacy efforts have been concentrated in rural areas. People of non-Russian nationalities are illiterate in larger numbers. Women's education became a major priority after the revolution. Newly literate people received guidance as to what to read and how to take notes. (CML)

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LITERACY LESSONS

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INTERNATIONAL LITERACY YEAR

Eradicating illiteracy in the USSR

by M.V. Kabatchenko and L.D. Yasnikova

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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The eradication of illiteracy in Russia has a lengthy history, although a systematic and consistent campaign for this purpose among the population only began after the Great October Socialist Revolution of 1917.

Owing to measures taken during the first decade of Soviet power, the illiteracy level declined sharply. By the end of the second decade, the problem was considered to be generally solved.

This success was due to a number of factors:

- The illiterate people themselves were eager to learn. Education was considered a means to a better life.
- The authorities' efforts were aimed at creating favourable conditions for the eradication of illiteracy as a priority action.
- The eradication of illiteracy and preparation for general education were carried on simultaneously, with the enrolment of children as well as adults in formal education.
- The process of illiteracy eradication was implemented while radical social and economic changes were taking place: rapid industrialization and agricultural reforms were bringing about changes in the way of life of millions of people.
- The campaign had a nationwide character: the population as a whole took an active part in solving educational problems through self-governing institutions.
- Teaching staff was widely trained to teach reading and writing to all nationalities; methods were developed which would rapidly reduce the rate of illiteracy among the population.

The governmental reforms of Peter the Great at the beginning of the eighteenth century played a considerable part in the education of the Russian people: introduction of the Cyrillic alphabet; opening of the first public schools; use of international experience in training specialists.

During the following centuries, the national progressive forces strove to overcome illiteracy throughout the country.

An instrumental force for popular education was the Decembrists – the first noble class revolutionaries. The Decembrists considered that the Lancaster system of mutual education was the most effective for the purpose of spreading literacy among the population. According to this method, teaching was carried out in small groups (about ten people) by senior students under the tutorship of teachers.

A bright page in Russian history of the eradication of illiteracy was the 'going to the people' movement carried out by the intellectuals, mainly teachers and doctors. This was a spontaneous and unselfish gesture by the best-educated elements in society in favour of education for children and adults. Their work was guided by the triple concept of the reasonable, the good and the eternal.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the peasants' school system expanded. These schools, which were quite numerous, were financed by rural funds.

In 1861 the Literacy Committee was founded by the Free Economic Society with a view to setting up Sunday and evening schools for workers' children. In these schools, which owed their existence to the voluntary

participation of teachers, lessons took place on Sundays, during holidays, or in the evening. For many adults, such classes represented the only form of education available.

Distance education also made its appearance: secondary studies could be carried out at home; popular scientific courses were organized; reference material was published; special schools, courses or classes were made available in educational institutions for adults.

Nevertheless, even the widespread increase in the number of schools and classes could not satisfy the demand for education, because the Tsarist government deliberately restrained cultural development.

ERADICATING ILLITERACY AFTER THE OCTOBER REVOLUTION

Despite the enormous efforts by the Russian intellectuals in the field of education, on the eve of the October Revolution the level of literacy was extremely low. At the beginning of the twentieth century, only 223 out of every 1,000 inhabitants were literate. In 1908 less than one-fifth of eligible children were enrolled in schools.

> *There is no such other wild country in Europe where masses of people are being robbed in terms of education, enlightenment and knowledge.*
>
> V.I. Lenin

In 1917 the new government's programme reserved a key role for education. First the State Committee on Education under the direction of A.B. Lunatcharsky was founded. N.K. Krupskaya, head of the out-of-school education department, expressed the main tasks for adult education as follows:

> *Not only should the pupils receive the key to knowledge, they should also be shown the doors that can be opened with it. While using the techniques of literacy, we should also aim at widening the intellectual horizons of the pupils.*

The most active stage of illiteracy eradication in the USSR was then initiated on the basis of an integrated organizational process and the introduction of progressive methods.

The eradication of illiteracy and the improvement of the education system was encouraged in the December 1917 spelling reform which considerably simplified Russian orthography.

In 1918 a programme was approved providing free, compulsory, general and polytechnical education for both male and female children up to the age of 17 and for out-of-school adults.

The First All-Russian Congress on out-of-school education (May 1919) was the first to suggest creating an education system for teenagers and adults which would include:

- a network of schools intended to eradicate illiteracy among the population by means of teaching adults and teenagers from the age of 15 upwards the bases of reading, writing and counting. These literacy schools should accommodate not more than 200 illiterate people and provide courses lasting 3-4 months on average.
- a network of elementary schools aimed at providing adults and teenagers from 15 upwards with the basic

knowledge, skills and cultural habits necessary for further self-education. These schools, one for a maximum of 3000 people, would include groups of illiterate and poorly literate individuals.

A network of higher schools and people's universities was set up where adults could study subjects of interest to them.

> *Every illiterate of the Republic from 18 to 50 years of age has the obligation to learn reading and writing either in his native language or in Russian, at wish. Teaching will be provided in the public schools which already exist or which are being created for the illiterate population in accordance with the plans of the National Commissariat for Education.*
>
> Extracts from the governmental decree of 26 December 1919. 'On the eradication of illiteracy among the RSFSR population'.

An enormous number of volunteers, party and trade union members, and members of the Communist Youth were involved in the process of eradicating illiteracy. The general public also participated through such activities as the 'Down with Illiteracy' Society. Teaching was carried out in clubs, private homes, factories and offices.

In December 1919 an All-Russia Extraordinary Commission on Illiteracy was set up and assumed a leading role for a number of years. The government authorized educational organs to enlist all literate members of the population to teach the illiterate.

Over the period 1918–1920 the number of schools in Soviet Russia increased by 13,000, while the number of learners rose by almost 2 million.

Despite the hardships that prevailed in the country, a network was created of out-of-school institutions such as libraries, schools for adults, popular homes and universities, courses, lectures, cinemas, studios, etc., to assist workers and peasants in self-education and self-development.

In order to accelerate the process, Lenin proposed a reduction in the expenses of other departments for the benefit of the Narcompros (National Commissariat for Education).

> *We must strive again and again for newspapers and books to be distributed free of charge to libraries and readers through a network correctly servicing the whole country, the whole mass of workers, soldiers, peasants. Then the longing of the people for literacy and knowledge will develop a hundred-fold stronger and faster and be more successful. Then education will advance with gigantic strides.*
>
> V.I. Lenin, *On the work of the Narcompros.*

The Congress for Illiteracy Eradication of 1924 adopted a plan for a campaign to eradicate illiteracy. Much consideration was given to the methods of teaching reading and writing, and to the question of preventing relapse into illiteracy.

With this aim in view, a network of supporting instructor schools was created responsible for introducing improved methods, instructing teachers, generalizing experience, etc. It is essential to note that in the process of illiteracy eradication organizational, methodological and financial matters were dealt with simultaneously.

Adult education was linked with cultural stimulation: reading newspapers and interesting stories aloud for the benefit of illiterates. Special attention was focused on developing the ability to listen, to become accustomed to the literary language, to enrich the vocabulary and to broaden ideas. It was considered very important to teach the learners the use of books as a means of acquiring knowledge: dictionaries, reference books, catalogues, manuals, etc.

The manuals were based on these ideas, and were linked with daily life. They included slogans understandable to people who struggled for freedom: 'We are not slaves', 'We shall have no slaves', 'We shall win!' etc.

The eradication of illiteracy in the USSR was not only understood as a means of teaching the population how to read, write and calculate. In connection with the industrialization of the country, there was a sharp increase in the demand for skilled technical personnel. Therefore it was extremely urgent to eradicate technical illiteracy which, in today's terms, means functional illiteracy.

Starting in 1921, industries developed four-year factory-and-workshop training schools (FWT) where qualified workers were trained. In 1923 youth schools (RYS) were created in rural areas where agronomy, technology and agricultural methods were taught. People who attended these schools were often only semi-literate; thus the learning process raised their level of knowledge considerably.

Illiteracy eradication work also continued during the second decade of the Soviet State. Care was taken to create the conditions necessary to accelerate the process; programmes and manuals were improved.

The first five-year plan (1929-1933) proposed the eradication of illiteracy among all the population aged from 16 to 50. During the 1928–1929 academic year 2 million people acquired literacy; in 1929–1930, 8 million and the next year 11 million. By 1930 67% of the USSR population was literate. Along with illiteracy eradication, a massive campaign to teach poorly literate people was carried out, which prevented illiteracy relapse. Moreover, decisive steps were taken in order to ensure the education of young girls. At the same time compulsory education was introduced where the conditions made it possible.

Special courses were organized for illiterate children who for various reasons could not attend school. Accelerated two-year and one-year school courses were also organized for teenagers.

A strict register of all school-age children from 6 to 17 was maintained in the country. The school system

developed accordingly. Despite economic hardships the government supplied the children with food, clothes, shoes and school books.

Various non-governmental organizations, such as cooperatives, trade-unions, etc., were also called upon to participate in the struggle against illiteracy. In 1930–1931 a general agreement was concluded among the governmental organizations and the popular voluntary societies involved. They committed themselves to a massive mobilization campaign for the eradication of illiteracy and rudimentary literacy.

In 1939 USSR literacy rates reached 81.2%. Nevertheless illiteracy had not completely disappeared: part of the population, especially in the rural areas, remained illiterate. Therefore, from the end of the 1930s, the main efforts were directed to the rural areas:

- *To develop plans for complete illiteracy eradication throughout the rural districts. These plans should indicate not only the duration of education for an illiterate, but also the persons responsible for his education.*
- *To develop assistants to work among the population, including the rural intelligentsia, particularly teachers and senior students of secondary schools.*
- *To establish ways of encouraging those people who have distinguished themselves in the matter of illiteracy eradication.*

Extracts from the Decree of the RSFSR Popular Commissariat for Education, *On measures for illiteracy eradication.* (1940).

For the illiterate and poorly literate population, special materials were widely circulated: primers, textbooks, Russian language and geography manuals, and books of arithmetic problems.

Evening schools were opened for working youth. The students were given special privileges: leaves during examination periods, nourishing diet, etc.

Literacy work also continued during the Second World War (1941–1945). After the war an extensive

network of schools was developed for the benefit of young workers and rural youth who could not receive normal education during the war. With time, the numbers of literate and poorly literate people considerably decreased. The first post-war census indicated that illiteracy had practically disappeared.

'Woman! Learn to read' proclaims the heading of this 1923 poster from the USSR. The text at the bottom says: 'Oh, little Mother, if you knew how to read, you could help me!'

Personal experience convinced workers and peasants that they would not be masters of their own lives until they had access to education. An educational mobilization campaign was therefore introduced nationwide. Scientists, specialists in various disciplines, teachers and artists travelled in special 'literacy' boats and trains all over the country to large and small cities to convert the population to the cause of literacy.

Peasants produced requests to open schools in their own villages, since very often their children could not attend distant schools. Schools built with peasant money did not always meet high standards, but they were built out of extreme necessity and were therefore welcomed by the government.

The initiative of the population was sometimes hampered by the bureaucratism of the national education bodies, which refused to support schools created through the finances and instigation of the population outside the framework of official plans.

During this period the people's education councils, a form of independent activity of the masses in the matter of national education, did not carry out all the tasks which were set them. Rather they outlined the effective way to solve the problem. It is not by chance that nowadays national education has reverted to this initial idea: councils are being created in schools and in districts to solve modern educational problems.

ERADICATING ILLITERACY AMONG NON-RUSSIAN NATIONALITIES

Before the Revolution the level of literacy among non-Russian nationalities was particularly low; Tadjiks 3.9%, Kazakhs 2.1%, Ossets 2.1%, Uzbeks 1.6%; for Yakuts and Khirghiz it amounted to a fraction of one per cent.

One of the first acts of the Soviet Government was the Declaration of the Rights of the Peoples of Russia, which defined the right of these groups to self-determination and free development. As from 1918 in these regions schools and educational institutions were opened in which tuition was given in the local language.

In 1919–1920, in spite of the civil war, rationing difficulties and lack of national staff, the number of learners in the territories with non-Russian populations increased 2-to 3-fold.

The First (1922) and the Second (1924) Congresses on illiteracy eradication were significant events in this matter. The delegates to these congresses were especially concerned by the low literacy levels among non-Russian peoples due to the lack of teachers and books, and to the scattered population. The participants recognized the necessity of setting up four-month courses for illiterates, and six- to eight-month courses for people with rudimentary literacy, both providing six to eight hours of daily attendance at school.

The First Congress recommended:

- organizing exhibitions in national education departments;
- installing showcases in public places containing educational material, manuals and students' work;
- publishing handbooks and methodological manuals for teachers dealing with illiterate and poorly literate people.

Illiteracy eradication was linked with practical questions. It was decided that school would be the starting point for the propagation of agricultural literacy, increased labour productivity and health education.

ERADICATING ILLITERACY AMONG WOMEN

The 1897 population census indicated that only 12.4% of women were literate, and these belonged to the privileged classes. Social attitudes and economic conditions prevented women from obtaining any education. What could a mother teach her children when all she knew about was exhausting labour? The only guidance a mother could give her children concerned traditions and prejudices. She possessed no elementary knowledge about her child's development and about what was necessary for it to grow strong and healthy.

Together with the problem of illiteracy among the non-Russian populations, the question of women's education became a major priority after the Revolution. The initial urgent appeals for girls to attend schools did not produce the desired results because of the economic situation and the extremely conservative attitudes of parents, who were anxious that their sons would be the first to receive education or at least become literate.

In order to involve women in the literacy process, it was important to change their role in society. Their involvement in productive labour, which offered escape from the drudgery of the home, proved to be particularly effective in promoting learning.

In order to assist female workers by taking care of their children, nurseries, kindergartens and playgrounds were opened. Thus many women could work more effectively, while also attending Sunday schools, clubs, conferences, etc. It was most helpful that the places of study were situated close to their living quarters (community homes) and workplace (studying between shifts). Such educational assistance proved to be productive and still exists today. In such conditions many teaching universities aim to increase the cultural resources of the mother and grandmother and help her to solve family education problems.

By overcoming their own illiteracy, women began to realize the importance of education for their children and refused to accept that their daughters would be subject to the same fate.

But the real solution to the problem of illiteracy eradication among girls appeared only with the introduction of general primary education.

SELF-EDUCATION AND ILLITERACY ERADICATION

The eagerness for knowledge among youth and adults, especially those who had acquired basic literacy, could not be met by the schools, clubs and popular universities which were being opened throughout the country. Besides, the national budget could not support the creation of enough of them and therefore self-education became one of the main ways of acquiring knowledge. Recommendations were issued to assist the process of self-education: eminent teachers drew attention to books as the main source of learning. To achieve better results and to save time, it was recommended to choose out of all the books those which were not too

CONCLUSION

To sum up, it may be said that the success of the illiteracy eradication campaign in the USSR has been the result of a number of factors.

1. *The systematic eradication of illiteracy in the USSR started after the Great October Socialist Revolution, when millions of people became actively involved in the country's political, social and economic life. This was the main incentive for the need for education.*
2. *The Communist Party and the government set forth a clearcut programme for illiteracy eradication and created the conditions for its implementation.*
3. *Illiteracy eradication was a major development programme which received utmost priority.*
4. *Illiteracy eradication was carried out within the framework of the creation of a national education system and was integrated into this system.*
5. *The population itself was called upon to solve the problem of public schools. With this view in mind, the population was widely mobilized to participate in programmes of illiteracy eradication and further education.*
6. *All the literate population of the country, including various social organizations, were involved in eradicating illiteracy. This included the intellectuals, among whom the teachers' contribution was particularly important.*
7. *While the illiteracy eradication process was widespread, it was particularly intensive among non-Russian populations where literacy levels were extremely low. In such circumstances, the campaign was assisted by adapting literacy teaching to the characteristics and living conditions of local populations, turning intellectual assistance to the benefit of backward communities, and forming a national intelligentsia.*
8. *Intellectual and material investments in the education of women appeared particularly worthwhile, since they had a multiplier effect and led to an ever-increasing portion of the population being enrolled in schools.*
9. *It was very important that deliberate efforts were made to eradicate illiteracy in rural areas.*
10. *Taking account of the real needs and potentials of the population led to the establishment of a network of out-of-school educational centres for adults (courses, meetings, universities, clubs, etc.) throughout the country.*

difficult; out of those, books that were interesting; out of those, books which had practical usefulness, and could help to improve one's life and interpersonal relationships.

Neo-literates received guidance as to how and what to read, and how to take notes on important matters. Social awareness was encouraged to achieve an understanding of the facts and their relationships in the order of events.

Social contact is the most interesting and the most accessible course of action for youth, and was thus recommended for the purpose of self-education: meeting people of various backgrounds and understanding the basic elements of their professions.

Excursions and visits to exhibitions were suggested in order to widen one's horizons and to increase one's cultural level. At the same time, young people were made to understand that this should not be merely a pastime, but a purposeful learning experience.

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